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SUBJECT: Khabarovsk Governor Named New RFE Polpred

¶1. On April 30, Dmitry Medvedev accepted RFE Polpred Oleg Safonov's resignation and appointed Khabarovsk Governor Viktor Ishayev as his successor. Though most observers had predicted a move for the governor who has held power since 1991, few predicted the move to Polpred. The change in post is not being seen as a promotion, but rather an honorary position, though one that will oversee the Russia-European Union Summit in Khabarovsk later this month and preparations for the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok. The move may be a harbinger of further shakeups in the Russian Far East, and Primorye Governor Sergey Darkin may be at the front of the line for changes.

¶2. Ishayev has a reputation as a strong manager, and was one of the most independent Russian governors, criticizing cutbacks in certain social benefits, Russian-Chinese border demarcation, and Kremlin economic policies. Observers have commented that the move may be an effort by the Kremlin to shore up authority over APEC preparations with the Polpred's office, control of which prior Polpred Safonov 'lost' to Primorye Governor Sergey Darkin.

According to one observer, another task from Medvedev may be to find a way to replace Primorye Governor Sergey Darkin with a suitable successor. Vyacheslav Shport, Khabarovsk's Acting Governor, will likely move to the Governor's office after the Kray Duma considers him for the position later this week.

¶3. Outgoing Polpred Safonov was appointed in October 2007 by Putin to fight corruption and crime in the RFE, but his efforts were hindered by bureaucratic infighting between the Prosecutor's Office and the Special Investigative Commission while pursuing cases against officials in the region. He is a relative of Viktor Ivanov, the Head of the Anti-Drug Department, and an entrenched "siloviki." Unnamed sources in his office commented that they were caught unaware by the move, since Safonov had a busy schedule for May. There have been no reports on what his next position will be.

¶4. Rumors about an end to Ishayev's leadership of the Krai began to circulate in late 2008 when critical coverage of the Governor began to emerge from government-run media outlets. The criticism was reportedly initiated by Deputy Presidential Administration Head Vladislav Surkov, who was put off by Ishayev's independence and dissatisfied with his handling of recent protests. Observers interpreted it as an effort to prepare the public for a change in leadership. Other signs were seen even earlier, when Ishayev allies moved into posts apparently in preparation for his new appointment. In March, Ishayev lured close ally Shport away from a lucrative private-sector job into his cabinet and pushed for another close ally, Aleksandr Levintal, to move into position as Deputy RFE Polpred under Safonov. Only a month later Ishayev moved into the RFE Polpred post with one ally as his deputy and the other as the likely new Khabarovsk Governor.

Comment

¶5. In what appears to be a new twist, authorities announced the latest resignation/appointment at the end of the business week,

giving little chance for comment and review. Ishayev had long been a mild thorn in the Kremlin's side, so the appointment is clearly not a reward for loyal service. Putting him in a position with diminished power is an easy way of taking away real levers of power, while avoiding the criticism associated with dismissing a governor. Ishayev is in poor health and reportedly not personally interested in the new position, so there will likely be yet another Polpred within the next couple of years. Safonov held one meeting with the diplomatic corps and seemed open to international cooperation. Ishayev has generally not courted foreign investors or cooperation, and is often quite critical of the U.S. As for Primorye Governor Darkin, if this move is indeed part of a larger chess game then Darkin could indeed be vulnerable. However, his demise has been predicted too many times for us to be taking any bets.

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